



*Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks*

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Senator John Brenden  
Senate Fish and Game Committee Chairman  
Capitol Station  
Helena MT 59620

Representative Jeffrey Welborn  
House Fish, Wildlife & Parks Committee Chairman  
Capitol Station  
Helena MT 59620

Dear Senator Brenden and Representative Welborn:

Thank you for your recent letter inquiring about Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' (FWP) direction for bison management in Montana. As you know, this is an issue that generates significant public interest from a diverse set of parties in the state. This interest and passion has yielded no small amount of speculation, rumor, and misinformation about bison management. I appreciate the opportunity to clear up some of the confusion.

These issues are functionally divided into three separate categories – those associated with Yellowstone Park in the Greater Yellowstone area (GYA), those associated on non-tribal lands outside of the GYA, and those associated with tribal lands. I offer the following responses to the issues you have raised, as they pertain to each of these three situations.

Greater Yellowstone Area

The bison that migrate into Montana from Yellowstone National Park (YNP) are managed under the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP). The IBMP was the product of ten years of planning among five state and federal agencies that ultimately resulted in a court-ordered mediation, where the final management agreement was struck. It is designed as an adaptive plan that adjusts to changing conditions over time. Under adaptive management, the IBMP partners are considering year-round tolerance for bison in a limited area on the west side of YNP. This area consists of the Hebgen Basin, the Cabin Creek Recreation and Wildlife Management Unit, the Monument Mountain Unit of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, and the uppermost reaches of the Gallatin River. The northern extent of this area includes the Taylor Fork drainage, but it does not include areas northward into Big Sky or areas further north into the Gallatin Canyon. This proposal would also allow for year-round tolerance for bull bison only in the Gardiner basin. We offered a scoping notice for this proposal on July 23, 2012 and held public meetings in Gardiner and West Yellowstone. We hope to have a draft environmental assessment completed this spring.

Outside Yellowstone

On nontribal lands outside of the GYA, the department currently has no plans to move bison anywhere in the state of Montana. More specifically, the department has no plans to move bison to any of our


Wildlife Management Areas, including the Spotted Dog, Marias River, and Milk River properties. Furthermore, in the event bison movement is contemplated in the future, the department will fully comply with the provisions of SB 212, passed in 2011 and now codified within § 87-1-216, MCA. FWP has initiated a planning process to explore the potential for bison to be moved to appropriate areas and managed as wildlife in Montana. While not required under SB 212, FWP believes it is an important step to first take a statewide look at bison management in Montana. The planning process began with eight public scoping meetings during 2012, and generated more than 20,000 comments, which are currently being summarized and analyzed. If the decision is made to proceed with more site-specific analysis, FWP would convene a local working group in any area under consideration, in order to assist FWP with analyzing issues and making recommendations. For any eventual decision to establish bison in an area of Montana outside the GYE (and outside of tribal lands), a management plan would be developed in compliance with SB 212 (MCA 87-1-216), MEPA, and other statutory requirements. Again, please be assured that there are currently no such plans, nor are there any pre-determined outcomes to the planning process.

#### Tribal Lands

Native American tribes on reservations in Montana and outside of Montana have expressed strong desire for Yellowstone bison to restore cultural and subsistence values. Any bison that might be moved to a tribal reservation would be certified disease-free by the state veterinarian and APHIS, and expectations for their management will be articulated in an MOU with the Tribe(s) similar to the MOU agreed upon with the Fort Peck Tribes. If bison were to go to an out-of-state reservation, they would have to meet the requirements of the receiving state. The FWP Commission would also have to approve any such translocation. Presently no plans are in place for moving bison to any tribal lands, other than the potential for moving one-half of the bison that were moved to Fort Peck to Fort Belknap. As you note in your letter, that is presently not possible due to a court injunction.

FWP has an obligation to manage all wildlife for the greatest benefit of all Montanans. Because of the substantial interest surrounding bison, we believe it is important to undertake an open and honest planning effort to determine the course of bison management. In answer to your question about what legislators can do to help facilitate forward movement, your assistance in dispelling rumors and misinformation regarding bison management would be very helpful. Collectively, we must work with all interests to address bison conservation, in order to ensure that we properly consider where, if anywhere, we can find acceptable places for wild bison.

Sincerely,



M. Jeff Hagener  
Director